2175 Blind Faith  
  
After having a short discussion, Cassie and Helie were ready to set out. There was no reason to linger, anyway — the decision had been made, and there was no going back.  
  
Helie was concerned for the clan, but at the moment, the best way she could protect them was to play dead for a while.  
  
The abominable jungle rustled eerily around the two of them, making Cassie's skin crawl. She shivered and placed her hand on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer, trying to find comfort in its familiar texture.  
  
Altering Jest's memories had burned most of her remaining essence... in fact, she had been forced to cut the connection to most of her marks while delving into his past to preserve some, and as a result, she was truly and utterly blind at the moment.  
  
She could not even activate her Awakened Ability — or rather, she could, but only for a short while. Which meant that it was better not to use her Aspect unless there was an emergency.  
  
Both of she and Helie were beaten and battered, still reeling from the fierce violence of the battle and utterly exhausted. Nevertheless, Cassie spoke after hesitating for a few moments:  
  
"Saint Helie... I'm afraid I am running quite low on soul essence. So, while my Echo will be of some help, I will have to rely on you to get us out of this appalling jungle."  
  
She could not see what expression the beautiful Saint made, but it somehow felt like someone was giving her a dubious look.  
  
In the end, Helie coughed.  
  
"Sure, no problem. Luckily, I wasted very little essence myself — that old goat prevented me from using my Aspect throughout most of the battle, after all. And I am sure that your Echo will be very helpful, as well."  
  
She paused for a moment, and then added in a slightly stifled tone:  
  
"...Where did this creepy Echo come from, anyway? What kind of vile, ghastly Nightmare Creature did you kill to get it, Lady Cassia?"  
  
Cassie tilted her head a little, then answered honestly:  
  
"Oh... it is an Echo of myself."  
  
Helie seemed to have lost the ability to speak for a few moments.  
  
Then, she asked in a small voice:  
  
"W—what?"  
  
Cassie shrugged.  
  
"Well... certain events transpired in my Third Nightmare, and as a result, I had to kill a Corrupted version of myself. I happened to receive an Echo, as well."  
  
Helie took a deep breath, trying to gather her thoughts. Then, she looked back to the delicate young woman standing motionlessly in front of her.  
  
'Right. Of course. Why not? Sounds perfectly reasonable!'  
  
...Not!  
  
"And you just keep an Echo of yourself around?"  
  
Song of the Fallen nodded elegantly.  
  
"I do."  
  
Then, her expression changed slightly, and she added hastily:  
  
"Of a Corrupted version of myself. Hence the tentacles... please don't misunderstand, Saint Helie! I absolutely do not have those myself. After all, I am not some eldritch horror wearing human skin. I am most definitely a perfectly normal human woman."  
  
Helie stared at her for a bit, then foгced out an unconvincing chuckle.  
  
"Sure... sure, of course! If you say so."  
  
It was funny — she was old enough to be Cassia's mother... no, maybe a cool aunt... but, somehow, it did not feel that way. If anything, the exquisitely beautiful young woman gave her the opposite feeling.  
  
Shaking her head, Helie called upon the power of her Aspect and assumed her Transcendent form. Then, she offered Song of the Fallen her hand.  
  
"I don't say this often, but... please climb onto my back, Lady Cassia. I'll give you a smooth ride."  
  
Saying that, she grinned.  
  
The young woman hesitantly raised her hand, grasped Helie's own, and mounted gracefully.  
  
"Hold tight!"  
  
Summoning her bow, Helie delved into the jungle at a swift trot. Both of them had to remain alert due to all the dangers that the Hollows hid —however, they had a good chance of emerging to the surface alive.  
  
Cassie had never ridden a centaur before, let alone such a friendly one, so she did not know what to expect. However, the journey turned out to be far more comfortable than she had thought it would be.  
  
At some point, she spoke:  
  
"Saint Helie... I will need your help once we arrive at the Song encampment, as well."  
  
Helie turned her head a little, looking back.  
  
"How so?"  
  
Cassie hesitated for a moment.  
  
"You were not involved in what your uncle had done, but you are still his niece. Master Orum sacrificed his life for the Song clan. He had a personal relationship with the Queen, as well... so, there is a good chance that she will receive you well. I, on the other hand, will be met with hostility and suspicion. So, you will have to try and smooth things over."  
  
Helie let out a wistful sigh.  
  
"I can try, I guess. But..."  
  
She paused.  
  
"But what happens next?"  
  
They had discussed the consequences of seeking shelter in the Song camp already, but really, the end result of their actions remained ambiguous —especially for Helie, who knew neither what Nephis was planning nor what had truly pushed Cassie to take this step.  
  
From the outside, it simply looked as if thеy were trying to betray the Sword Domain and switch sides in order to support the Song Army. Of course, the Sword Domain had betrayed them first — but that was not a clean justification. Reality was never so simple.  
  
Even if Jest had attempted to kill them, and even if the King himself could not be trusted, both Cassie and Helie were tied to the Sword Domain. Cassie would have to fight against Nephis and the Fire Keepers if she joined the Sword Army, while Helie would have to fight against her own clan... it was all a proper mess.  
  
In the end, Cassie just sighed.  
  
"Things will resolve themselves, somehow."  
  
Helie chuckled.  
  
"Ah... that's good, then. If that is the case, I'm relieved."  
  
That answer was as good as any other would have been. Helie had already decided to put her faith in Nephis, after all... she had refused Jest's offer in hopes that Changing Star would make things work, somehow.  
  
Now, the only choice she had was to follow that hope.  
  
After a few minutes of silence, Helie suddenly spoke in a somber tone:  
  
"Well, then, I have something to confess."  
  
Cassie raised an eyebrow, surprised.   
  
"...Confess?"  
  
Helie did not say anything else for a full minute, then sighed.  
  
"This whole damn war started based on the excuse of punishing Clan Song for sending assassins after Changing Star, didn't it? Well, actually..."  
  
She paused for a moment.  
  
"It was me."  
  
Cassie tilted her head.  
  
"What do you mean?"  
  
Helie let out a joyless chuckle.  
  
"Look! It seems there's something that even Song of the Fallen doesn't know. But, yes... there were no Song assassins, and neither Dar of the Maharana clan nor Silent Stalker had anything to do with the attempt on Changing Star's life. They're not the only Saints who know their way around a bow, you know? It was me. I shot those arrows."  
  
She raised her great bow, which had grown in size to fit her Transcendent form.  
  
Helie sighed, and her shoulders fell.  
  
"Well, it wasn't like I had any choice. When Morgan of Valor comes calling, уou don't say no. I was ordered to make it seem like I wanted to kill Lady Nephis, and so, I did. I thought I should mention it before we reach the stronghold of Clan Song."  
  
Cassie remained silent for a while, stunned.  
  
That... she had really had no idea. They had suspected that Clan Valor — perhaps even Morgan herself — was behind the assassination, of course.  
  
But their suspicion had never once fallen on Saint Helie.  
  
...And there Cassie was, priding herself on being unassuming and knowing things.  
  
'Huh.'  
  
But how did it make any sense, for Master Orum to have been a Song spy while his niece was Valor's secret weapon? Their Legacy clan was not even really on the map, in the grand scheme of things... especially not compared to the deeply impactful role they seemed to have played in the Great War.  
  
Life was full of irony sometimes.  
  
Eventually, Cassie shook her head and said with a bit of dejection in her voice:  
  
"Saint Helie... respectfully, please don't mention this particular part when negotiating with Clan Song. Some things... are better left unsaid!"  
  
Helie responded with a quiet laugh.  
  
"Alright. I think I can keep my mouth shut, if you insist."  
  
By then, they were almost halfway to the fissure leading to the surface of the First Rib.  
  
And Cassie had already replenished a little essence — enough of it, at least, to maintain a connection to one of her marks.  
  
She could have restored her connection to Helie, but instead, she softly touched the mark left on Sunny — his original body that remained near Nephis.  
  
[Sunny?]  
  
He seemed to be drinking tea in the beautiful gazebo on the Ivory Island. Hearing Cassie's call, he lowered his tea cup.  
  
[Cassie? Where are you? I was trying to reach you earlier...]  
  
She hesitated for a moment.  
  
[Sorry. I was out of essence — in fact, I can't maintain this connection for long even now. So, please, listen carefully. I need to tell you something important.]  
  
He prepared to listen, raising his cup and taking a sip of the fragrant tea.  
  
Cassie took a deep breath.  
  
[So, the thing is... I am dead...]  
  
Sunny spat out his tea.  
  
[...officially, I mean.]